An Actor Whose Baby Blues Came in Many Shades of Gray

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Body

Paul Newman always wore his fame lightly, his beauty too. The beauty may have been more difficult to navigate, when he was young in the 1950's and still being called the next Marlon Brando, establishing his bona fides at the Actors Studio and on Broadway.

Yet Mr. Newman, who died at his home in Westport, Conn., on Friday, never seemed to resent his good looks, as some men did; instead, he shrugged them off without letting them go. He learned to use that flawless face, so we could see the complexities underneath. And later, when age had extracted its price, he learned to use time too, showing us how beauty could be beaten down and nearly used up.

You see the dangerous side of his beauty in "Hud," Martin Ritt's irresistible if disingenuous 1963 drama about a Texas ranching family in which Mr. Newman plays the womanizing son of a cattleman (the Hollywood veteran Melvyn Douglas), who's hanging onto a fast-fading way of life. The movie traffics in piety: the father refuses to dig for the oil that might change the family's fortunes because he doesn't approve of sucking the land dry. Mr. Newman plays the son, Hud, and it's his job to sneer at the old man's naivete and to play the villain, which he does so persuasively that he ends up being the film's most enduring strength.

A lot of reviewers clucked about Hud and Mr. Newman's grasping bad-boy ways (the word they used then was materialism), but the camera loves this cowboy Lothario so much -- or, rather, the actor playing him -- that his father's high-and-mighty ways don't stand a chance. Nobody else much does, either: when Hud hits on the family housekeeper (a smoky-voiced, smoking Patricia Neal), he sinks back in her bed and, with his nose deep in a daisy, asks with a leer, "What else you good at?" Rarely has the act of smelling a flower seemed as delectably dirty. It's no wonder that Pauline Kael, who refused to buy just about anything else this movie was selling, gave Mr. Newman his due.

There are some men, Kael wrote, who "project such a traditional heroic frankness and sweetness that the audience dotes on them, seeks to protect them from harm or pain." Mr. Newman did that for Kael, enough so that she was inspired to write about her own past and the California town that she "and so many of my friends came out of" -- and, here, I think she means girlfriends -- "escaping from the swaggering small-town hotshots like Hud."

What's striking is that what got Kael going wasn't the actor or his performance but the man, who, because he seemed to offer up an intangible part of himself, something genuine and real, something we could take home, became a true movie star.

I don't think Mr. Newman was ever as beautiful as he is in "Hud." His lean, hard-muscled body seems to slash against the wide-screen landscape, evoking the oil derricks to come, and the black-and-white cinematography turns his famous baby blues an eerie shade of gray. The character would be a heartbreaker if he were interested in

breaking hearts instead of making time with the bodies that come with them. That's supposed to make Hud a mean man, but mostly he seems self-interested. No one is tearing him apart and Mr. Newman doesn't try to plumb the depths with the role, which makes the character and the performance feel more contemporary than many of the head cases of the previous decade. He finds depths in these shallows.

Early in his career, Mr. Newman was often mistaken for Brando, so much so that he took to signing the other man's autograph. Both studied at the Actors Studio and jumped to Hollywood, but there's not much else to connect them beyond our demand for the Next Big Thing. The resemblance seems hard to grasp now, given their trajectories and how differently the two register onscreen: Brando sizzles, while Mr. Newman is as cool as dry ice. And unlike Brando, who at his death was often unkindly remembered for his baroque excesses, Mr. Newman seemed immune, bulletproof. (An exception: his support for Eugene McCarthy, which landed him on Nixon's enemies list.) He had a talent for evasion.

It was a talent that served him well during the 1960s, the decade in which he picked up the mantle of Hollywood stardom that Brando had shrugged off. Mr. Newman was one of the dominating male screen figures of that decade, appearing in critical and commercial successes like "Cool Hand Luke," a 1967 prison movie-cum-religious-allegory, and the 1969 western "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," in which he found a partner in charm in Robert Redford. These days, 1969 is more often remembered for another buddy movie, "Easy Rider," but "Butch Cassidy" may have had more lasting impact on the so-called New Hollywood, which struck gold with two photogenic male leads whose easy, breezy rapport helped transform rebellion into a salable, lucrative package.

Mr. Newman, who signed a contract with Warner Brothers in the 1950s, was a transitional figure between the old Hollywood and the new. Warners foolishly put him in a ludicrous 1954 costume extravaganza called "The Silver Chalice." He did better as the boxer Rocky Graziano in the 1956 biopic "Somebody Up There Likes Me." His Lower East Side accent is so thick it could have been served on rye at Katz's Delicatessen, but he holds the screen with his pretty-boy kisser and an intense, at times wild physical performance that suggests a terrific will behind that impeccable facade. He seems to be hurling himself at the camera, as if desperate to get our attention.

The roles improved, as did the performances, and suddenly he didn't seem to be trying as hard. He's silky smooth as a pool shark named Fast Eddie in Robert Rossen's 1961 high-key drama "The Hustler," in which Jackie Gleason, Piper Laurie and George C. Scott each take turns stealing scenes. At first Mr. Newman seems outclassed by his co-stars -- the film asks the actor, a nibbler rather than an outright thief, to do too much big acting. But he's still awfully good. He seduces and repels by turn, pulling you in so you can watch him peel Fast Eddie's defenses like layers of dead skin. It's a wonder there was anything left by the time he revived the character 25 years later in "The Color of Money."

He won an Oscar in 1987 for best actor for resurrecting Fast Eddie in that Martin Scorsese film, a piteously delayed response from his peers, who dangled six such nominations before giving up the prize. (Hedging its bets, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences had tossed Mr. Newman an honorary Oscar the year before.) He's superb in "The Color of Money," gracefully navigating its slick surfaces and periodically scratching beneath them, playing a variation on what had by then in movies like "The Drowning Pool" (1975), "Slap Shot" (1977) and "The Verdict" (1982) become a defining Newman type: the guy on the hustle who seems to have nothing much left but keeps his motor running, just in case.

The movies are not kind to older actors and yet Mr. Newman walked away from this merciless business seemingly unscathed. During his second and third acts, he kept his dignity partly by playing men who seemed to have relinquished theirs through vanity or foolishness. Some of them were holding on to decency in an indecent world; others had nearly let it slip through their fingers.

Decency seems to have come easily to Mr. Newman himself, as evidenced by his philanthropic and political endeavors, which never devolved into self-promotion. It was easy to take his intelligence for granted as well as his talent, which survived even the occasional misstep. At the end of "The Drowning Pool," a woman wistfully tells Mr. Newman, I wish you'd stay a while. I know how she feels.

Graphic

PHOTO: Paul Newman as "Hud" in 1963. (PHOTOGRAPH BY PARAMOUNT PICTURES CORPORATION)

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